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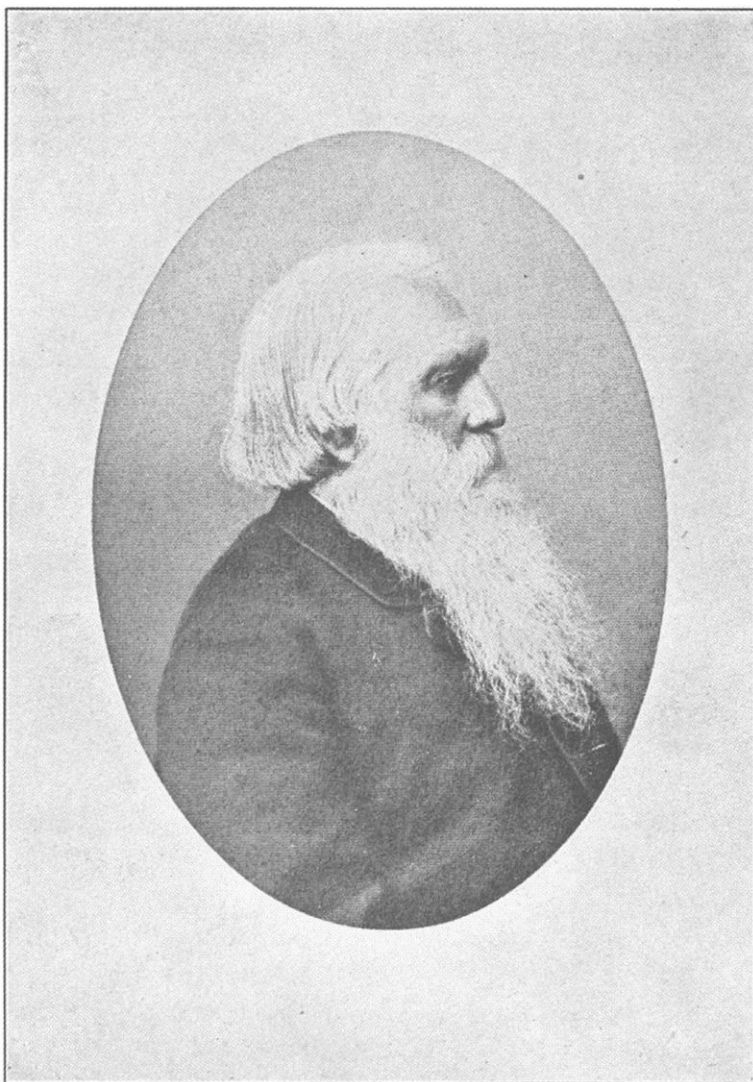
ALEXANDER THAYER AND HIS LIFE OF BEETHOVEN

By HENRY EDWARD KREHBIEL

SOMEWHAT more than a year ago the Editor of THE MUSICAL QUARTERLY reminded me that the hundreth anniversary of the birth of Alexander Wheelock Thayer would fall in the month of October of this year and asked me to write a memorial of Beethoven's great biographer for this journal. Mr. Sonneck knew that I had prepared the English edition (*i. e.*, edition in the English language) of "Thayer's life of Beethoven" and graciously intimated that that circumstance pointed to the propriety of his choice of me as Thayer's memorialist. I accepted the commission with gratitude, and am now seeking to fill it; but not with the glad enthusiasm which would have inspired me had not the world-war brought with it the most grievous disappointment of my life. For three years the manuscript of the English edition of the biography which had occupied my attention for ten summers, has been locked up in the vaults of a publishing house waiting for a time more propitious than the present for its publication. Thayer's work is at once the greatest and in its history the most extraordinary of all books dealing with the lives of musical composers; a work which, although the creation of a layman and amateur, is a prouder monument to musical America than the sum total of the achievements of the country's creative and recreative artists. When American readers shall be privileged to peruse in their own tongue the history which has brought them so much honor and put to shame the Beethoven biographers of Europe can not be predicted. Mayhap

When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

Scarcely before. But who shall say when that will be? However, as if prompted by a premonition, two months before completing the final revision of the manuscript I had obtained permission of the publishers to print the concluding chapters of the third volume, embodying my account of the last sickness and death of Beethoven in *The New York Tribune*; and for that publication I wrote a prefatory chapter which, in a revised form, was



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Alexander Wheelock Thayer, January, 1888
(By courtesy of Mr. Krehbiel.)

to serve as an Introduction to the Biography. That chapter I have now turned into the memorial to Thayer which Mr. Sonneck solicited at my hands.

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If for no other reasons than because of the long time and monumental patience expended upon the preparation, the vicissitudes through which it has passed, and the varied and arduous labors bestowed upon it by the author and his editors, the history of Alexander Wheelock Thayer's "Life of Beethoven" deserves to be told to the world. Thayer's work it is, and his monument, though others have labored long and painstakingly upon it. There has been no considerable time since the middle of the last century when it has not occupied the minds of the author and those who have been associated with him in its creation. Between the conception of its plan and its execution there lies a period of more than two generations. Four men have labored zealously and affectionately upon its pages and the fruits of more than four-score of men, stimulated to investigation by the first revelations made by the author, have been conserved by the ultimate form of the biography. It was seventeen years after Mr. Thayer entered upon what proved to be his life-task before he gave the first volume to the world and then in a foreign tongue; it was thirteen more before the third volume came from the press. This volume, moreover, left the work unfinished and thirty-two years more had to elapse before it was completed. When this was done the patient and self-sacrificing investigator was dead. He did not live to finish it himself, nor to see it finished by his faithful collaborator of many years, Dr. Deiters; neither did he live to look upon a single printed page in the language in which he had written that portion of the work which was published in his lifetime. It was left for another hand to prepare the English edition of an American writer's history of Germany's greatest tone-poet.

Under these circumstances there can be no vainglory in asserting that the appearance of the English edition of Thayer's "Life of Beethoven" will deserve to be set down as a significant occurrence in musical history. In it is told for the first time in the language of the great biographer the true story of the man Beethoven—his history stripped of the silly sentimental romance with which early writers and their later imitators and copyists invested it so thickly that the real humanity, the humanliness

of the composer, has never been presented to the world. In this biography there appears the veritable Beethoven set down in his true environment of men and things—the man as he actually was, the man as he himself, like Cromwell, asked to be shown for the information of posterity. It is doubtful if any other great man's history has been so encrusted with fiction as Beethoven's. Except Thayer's no biography of him has been written which presents him in his true light. The majority of the books written in late years, even that of Romaine Rolland, repeat many of the errors and falsehoods made current in the first books which were published about him. A great many of these errors and falsehoods are in the account of the composer's last sickness and death and were either inventions or exaggerations designed by their utterers to add pathos to a narrative which in unadorned truth is a hundredfold more pathetic than any tale of fiction could possibly be. Other errors have concealed the truth in the story of Beethoven's guardianship of his nephew, his relations with his brothers, the origin and nature of his fatal illness, his dealings with his publishers and patrons, the generous attempt of the Philharmonic Society of London to extend help to him when upon his death-bed.

In many details the story of Beethoven's life as told in this biography will be new to English and American readers; in a few cases the details will be new to the world, for the English edition of Thayer's Biography is not a translation of the German work, but a presentation of the original manuscript so far as the discoveries made after the writing did not mar its integrity, supplemented by the knowledge acquired since the publication of the first edition and placed at the service of the English editor by the German revisers of the second edition. The editor of the English edition was not only in communication with Mr. Thayer during the last ten years of his life, but was also associated to some extent with his continuator and translator, Dr. Deiters. Not only the fruits of the labors of the German editors, but the original manuscript of Thayer and the mass of material which he accumulated came into my hands and they form the foundation on which the English Thayer's Beethoven rests. The work is a vastly different one from that which Thayer dreamed of when he first conceived the idea of bringing order and consistency into the fragmentary and highly colored accounts of the composer's life upon which he fed his mind and fancy when a student at college; but it is, even in that part of the story which he did not write, true to the conception of what Beethoven's biography

should be. Knowledge of the composer's life has increased since the time when Thayer set out upon his task. The first publication of some of the results of his investigations in his "Chronologisches Verzeichniss" in 1865 and the first volume of the biography which appeared a year later, stirred the critical historians into activity throughout Europe. For them he had opened up a hundred avenues of research, pointed out a hundred subjects for special study. At once collectors of autographs brought forth their treasures, old men opened up the books of their memories, librarians gave eager searchers access to their shelves, churches produced their archives, and the hieroglyphic sketches which had been scattered all over Europe were deciphered by scholars and yielded up chronological information of inestimable value. To all these activities Thayer had pointed the way, and thus a great mass of facts was added to the already great mass which Thayer had accumulated. Nor did Thayer's labors in the field end with the first publication of his volumes. So long as he lived he gathered, ordered and sifted the new material which came under his observation and prepared it for incorporation into later editions and later volumes. After he was dead his editors continued the work.

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Alexander Wheelock Thayer was born in South Natick, Mass., on October 23d, 1817, and received a liberal education at Harvard College, whence he was graduated in 1843. He probably felt that he was cut out for a literary career, for his first work after graduation was done in the library of his Alma Mater. There interest in the life of Beethoven took hold of him. With the plan in his mind of writing an account of that life on the basis of Schindler's biography as paraphrased by Moscheles, and bringing its statements and those contained in the "Biographische Notizen" of Wegeler and Ries and a few English accounts into harmony, he went to Europe in 1849 and spent two years in making researches in Bonn, Berlin, Prague and Vienna. He then returned to America and in 1852 became attached to the editorial staff of *The New York Tribune*. It was in a double sense an attachment, for though illness compelled him to sever his connection with the newspaper and abandon journalism within two years, he never gave up his interest in it. He read it up to the day of his death and his acquaintance with the member of *The Tribune's* staff who was destined to have a part in the completion

of his life-work began when, a little more than a generation after he had gone to Europe for the second time, he opened a correspondence with me on a topic suggested by one of my critical comments. In 1854 he returned to Europe still fired with a determination to rid the life-history of Beethoven of the defects which marred it as it was told in the current histories. Schindler had sold the *memorabilia* which he had received from Beethoven and Beethoven's friend Stephen von Breuning to the Prussian government, and the precious documents were safely housed, though little consulted, in the Royal Library at Berlin. It was probably in studying them that Thayer realized fully that it was necessary to do more than rectify and harmonize the current accounts of Beethoven's life if it were correctly to be told. He had already unearthed much precious ore at Bonn, but he lacked the money which alone would enable him to do the long and large work which now loomed before him. In 1856 he again came back to America and sought employment, finding it, this time, in South Orange, N. J., where Lowell Mason employed him to catalogue his musical library. Meanwhile Dr. Mason had become interested in his great project and Mrs. Mehetabel Adams, of Cambridge, Mass., also. Together they provided the funds which enabled him to go to Europe for the third time. There he remained till he died. At first he devoted his time to research travels, visiting Berlin, Bonn, Cologne, Düsseldorf (where he found material of great value in the archives of the old Electoral Courts of Bonn and Cologne), Frankfort, Paris, Linz, Graz, Salzburg, London and Vienna. To support himself he took a small post in the Legation of the United States in the Austrian capital, but exchanged this, after a space, for the U. S. Consulship at Trieste, to which office he was appointed by President Lincoln on the recommendation of Senator Sumner. In Trieste he remained till his death, although out of office after October 1st, 1882. To Sir George Grove he wrote under date June 1st, 1895: "I was compelled to resign my office because of utter inability longer to continue Beethoven work and official labor together." From Trieste, when his official duties permitted, he went out on occasional exploring tours, but there he weighed and collated his accumulations of evidence and wrote his volumes.

In his travels Thayer visited every person of importance then living who had been in any way associated with Beethoven or had personal recollection of him, among them Schindler, the composer's factotum and biographer; Anselm Hüttenbrenner, in whose arms he died; Caroline van Beethoven, widow of Nephew

Karl; Charles Neate and Cipriani Potter, the English musicians who had been his pupils; Sir George Smart, who had visited him to learn the proper interpretation of the Ninth Symphony; Moscheles, who had been his professional associate in Vienna; Otto Jahn, who had undertaken a like task with Thayer's, but abandoned it and turned over his gathered material to him; Mähler, an artist, who had painted the composer's portrait; Gerhard von Breuning, son of Beethoven's most intimate friend, who, as a lad of fourteen, had been a cheery companion of the great man when he lay upon his fatal bed of sickness. With all these men and many others, Thayer talked, carefully recording their testimony in his note-books and piling up information with which to test the correctness of traditions and printed accounts, and to amplify the veracious story of Beethoven's life. His industry, zeal, keen power of analysis, candor and fairmindedness won the confidence and help of all with whom he came in contact except the literary charlatans whose romances he was bent on destroying in the interest of the verities of history. The Royal Library at Berlin sent the books in which many of Beethoven's visitors had written down their part of the conversations with him which the composer could not hear, to the investigator at Trieste, so that he might transcribe and study them at leisure. These precious transcriptions, through the kindness of Mrs. Jabez Fox, Mr. Thayer's niece and heir, came in turn into my possession, together with a transcription made by Dr. Deiters, and were of great use in the preparation of the English edition of Thayer's work.

In 1856 Thayer was ready with the manuscript for Volume I of the biography, which contained a sketch of the Courts of the Electors at Cologne and Bonn for two centuries, told of the music cultivated at them, and recorded the ancestry of the composer so far as it had been discovered. It also carried the history of Beethoven down to the year 1796. In Bonn, Thayer had made the acquaintance of Dr. Hermann Deiters, Court Councillor and enthusiastic musical *litterateur*, and to him he confided the task of editing and revising his manuscript and translating it into German. The reason which Thayer gave for not at once publishing his work in English was that he was unable to oversee the printing in his native land, where, moreover, it was not the custom to publish such works serially. He urged upon his collaborator that he practise literalness of translation in respect of his utterances, but gave him full liberty to proceed according to his judgment in the presentation of documentary evidence. All of the material in the volume except the drafts

from Wegeler, Ries and Schindler, with which he was frequently in conflict, was original discovery, the result of the labors begun in Bonn in 1849. His principles he set forth in these words:

I fight for no theories, and cherish no prejudices; my sole point of view is the truth. . . . I have resisted the temptation to discuss the character of his (Beethoven's) works and to make such a discussion the foundation of historical speculation, preferring to leave such matters to those who have a greater predilection for them. It appears to me that Beethoven the *composer* is amply known through his works, and in this assumption the long and wearisome labors of so many years were devoted to Beethoven the *man*.

The plan to publish his work in German enabled Thayer to turn over all his documentary to Deiters in its original shape—a circumstance which saved him great labor, but left it for his American editor and continuator. The German volume appeared in 1866; its stimulative effect upon musical Europe has already been referred to. Volume II came from the press in 1872, Volume III in 1879, both translated and annotated by Deiters. They brought the life of Beethoven down to the end of the year 1816, leaving a little more than a decade still unconsidered.

The health of Thayer had never been robust and the long and unintermittent application to the work of gathering and weighing evidence had greatly taxed his brain. He became subject to severe headaches, and after the appearance of the third volume he found it impossible to apply himself for even a short time to work upon the biography. In July, 1890, he wrote a letter to Sir George Grove, which the latter forwarded to me. In it he told in words of pathetic gratitude of the unexpected honors showered upon him at Bonn when, on the invitation of the Beethovenhaus Verein he attended the exhibition and festival given in Beethoven's birthplace a short time before. Then he added:

Of course the great question was on the lips of all—When will the fourth volume appear? I could only say: When the condition of my head allows it. No one could see or have from my general appearance the least suspicion that I was not in mental equal to my physical vigor. In fact the extreme excitement of these three weeks took off, for the time, twenty years of my age and made me young again; but afterwards, in Hamburg, and in Berlin the reaction came. Spite of the delightful musical parties at Joachim's, Hausmann's, Mendelssohn's . . . my head broke down more and more and since my return hither, (Trieste) July 3d, has as yet shown small signs of recuperation. The extreme importance of working out my fourth volume is more than ever impressed upon my mind and weighs upon me like an incubus. But as yet it is utterly impossible for me to really work. Of course

I only live for that great purpose and do not despair. My general health is such that I think the brain must in time recover something of its vigor and power of labor. What astonishes me and almost creates envy is to see this wonderful power of labor as exemplified by you and my neighbor, Burton. But from boyhood I have had head troubles, and what I went through with for thirty years in supporting myself and working on Beethoven is not to be described, and excites my wonder that I did not succumb. Well, I will not despair.

The truth is that Thayer's mind, active enough in some things, refused to occupy itself with the Beethoven material. It needed distraction and to give it that he turned to literary work of another character. He wrote a book against the notion that Lord Bacon was the author of Shakespeare's works and sent the manuscript to me in the hope that I might find a publisher for it (a vain hope, for popular interest in the Baconian theory had long before died out); another book on the Hebrews in Egypt and their exodus, which Mr. E. S. Wilcox, a friend of many years and public librarian at Peoria, published at his own expense. He also wrote essays and children's tales. Such writing he could do and also attend to his consular duties; but an hour or two of thought devoted to Beethoven, as he wrote me, always brought on a racking headache and unfitted him for labor of any kind.

Meanwhile year after year passed by and the final volume of the biography was no nearer completion than in 1880. In fact, beyond the selection and ordination of its material, it was scarcely begun. When after his death all of Thayer's posthumous papers were examined by me, in order that I might select those necessary for the work of completion which was to be undertaken by Dr. Deiters, I found not more than half a dozen pages of the first chapter of the fourth volume written out in fair hand by the author; all the rest was mere memoranda, chronologically arranged and references to documentary material. Thayer's friends and the lovers of Beethoven the world over grew seriously concerned at the prospect that the final volume would never be written. Sharing in this concern, I developed a plan which I fancied would enable Thayer to complete the biography notwithstanding the disabilities under which he was laboring. I asked the co-operation of Novello, Ewer & Co. of London, and got from them a promise to send a capable person to Trieste to act as a kind of literary secretary to the author. I thought that having all the material on hand chronologically arranged he might spend a portion of each day in talking it over with this secretary, but

without troubling his brain with care about the style of its literary presentation. The secretary was then to give the material a proper setting and submit it to Thayer for leisurely revision. Very hopefully, and with deep gratitude to my friends the English publishers, I submitted my plan to Thayer; but he would have none of it. Though unable to work upon the biography an hour continuously, as he had informed me, he yet clung to the notion that some day his brain would recover its energy and he would not only finish the work on its original lines, but also rewrite the whole for English and American readers. From one of his letters placed at my disposal by Sir George Grove it appears that subsequently (in 1892) there was some correspondence between him and an English publisher touching an English edition. The letter was written to Sir George on June 1st, 1895, and in it he said:

I then hoped to be able to revise and prepare it (the Beethoven MS.) for publication myself, and was able to begin the labor and arrange with a typewriter woman to make the clean copy. How sadly I failed I wrote you. Since that time the subject has not been renewed between us. I am now compelled to relinquish all hope of ever being able to do the work. There are two great difficulties to be overcome: the one is that all letters and citations are still in the original German as they were sent to Dr. Deiters; the other, there is much to be condensed, as I always intended it should be, for this reason: From the very first chapter to the end of Volume third I am continually in conflict with all previous writers and was compelled, therefore, to show in my text that I was right by so using my materials that the reader should be taken along step by step and compelled to see the truth for himself. Had all my arguments been given in notes nine readers out of ten would hardly have read them, and I should have been involved in numberless and endless controversies. Now the case is changed. A. W. T.'s novelties are now, with few if any exceptions, accepted as facts and can, in the English edition, be used as such. Besides this, there is much new matter to be inserted and some corrections to be made from the appendices of the three German volumes. The prospect now is that I may be able to do some of this work, or at all events, go through my MS. page by page, and do much to facilitate its preparation for publication in English. I have no expectation of ever receiving any pecuniary recompense for my forty years of labor, for my many years of poverty arising from the costs of my extensive researches, for my—but enough of this also.

In explanation of the final sentence in this letter it may be added that Thayer told me that he had never received a penny from his publisher for the three German volumes; nothing more, in fact, than a few books which he had ordered and for which the publisher made no charge.

Thus matters rested when Thayer died on July 15th, 1897. The thought that the fruits of his long labors and great sacrifices

should be lost to the world even in part was intolerable. Dr. Deiters, with undiminished zeal and enthusiasm, announced his willingness to revise the three published volumes for a second edition and write the concluding volume. Meanwhile all of Thayer's papers had been sent to Mrs. Fox. There was a large mass of material and it became necessary to sift it in order that all that was needful for the work of revision and completion might be placed in the hands of Dr. Deiters. This work was done at Mrs. Fox's request by me. I also, at the solicitation of Mrs. Fox and Charles Scribner's Sons (who had secured the publishing rights) undertook the task of preparing the English edition. Dr. Deiters accomplished the work of revising Volume I, which was published by Weber, the original publisher of the German volumes, in 1891. He then decided that before taking up the revision of Volumes II and III he would bring the biography to a conclusion. He wrote, not the one volume which Thayer had hoped would suffice him, but two volumes, the mass of material bearing on the last decade of Beethoven's life having grown so large that it could not conveniently be comprehended in a single tome, especially as Dr. Deiters had determined to incorporate critical discussions of the composer's principal works in the new edition. The advance sheets of Volume IV were in Dr. Deiters's hands when, full of years and honors, he died on May 1st, 1907. Breitkopf & Härtel had meanwhile purchased the German copy-right from Weber and they chose Dr. Hugo Riemann to complete the work of revision. Under Dr. Riemann's supervision Vols. IV and V were brought out in 1907-08 and Vols. II and III in 1910-11.

Not until this had been accomplished could the American collaborator go systematically to work on his difficult and voluminous task, for he had determined to use as much as possible of Thayer's original manuscript and adhere to Thayer's original purpose as expressed in the preface to the first German volume. I also thought it wise to condense the biography so as to bring it within three volumes of about 500 pages each and to enhance its readableness in various ways. To this latter end I abolished the many appendices which swell the German volumes and put their significant portions into the body of the narrative; I omitted many of the hundreds of footnotes, especially the references to the works of earlier biographers, believing that the special student would easily find the sources if he wished to do so and that the general reader would not care to verify the statements of one who has been accepted as the court of last resort in all matters of mere

fact pertaining to Beethoven, the man; I also omitted many letters and presented the substance of others in my own words, for the reason that the composer's correspondence has been printed in full more than once; of the letters and other documents of which literal use was made I wrote translations not only for the sake of greater accuracy, but to avoid conflict with the copyright privileges of English publishers. Being as free as the German editors in respect of the portions of the biography which did not come directly from the pen of Thayer, I chose my own method of presenting the story of the last decade of Beethoven's life, keeping in view the greater clearness and rapidity of narrative which, I believed, would result from a different grouping of material than that followed by the German editors in their adherence to the strictly chronological method established by Thayer.

It ought to be added that a large number of variations from the text of the German edition are explained in the body of the English edition or in footnotes. In cases where the German editors were found to be in disagreement with the original English manuscript in matters of opinion merely, I have chosen to let Mr. Thayer's arguments stand, though, as a rule, noting the adverse opinion of the German editor also. A prominent instance of this kind is presented by the mysterious love-letter found secreted in Beethoven's desk after his death. Though a considerable body of literature has grown up around the "Immortal Beloved" since Thayer advanced the hypothesis (he never called it anything more) that the lady was the Countess Therese Brunswick, the questions touching her identity and the dates of the letter are still as much an open one as they were when Thayer in his characteristically thorough manner subjected them to examination. I therefore permitted Thayer not only to present his case in his own words, but helped him by bringing his scattered pleadings and briefs into sequence. I also outlined in part the discussion which followed the promulgation of Thayer's theory and advanced a few fugitive reflections of my own. The related incident of Beethoven's vain matrimonial project was put into a light unseen by Thayer by new evidence which came to the surface while Dr. Riemann was engaged in his revisory work. It became necessary, therefore, that the date of that incident be changed from 1807, where Thayer put it, to 1810—an important change by which Beethoven's relations to Therese Malfatti were made to take on a more serious posture than Thayer was willing to accord them. I have also set forth the story of Beethoven's

relations with his English friends, his publishers and the London Philharmonic Society more fully than the German version presents them, and have told the painful and wretched history of Beethoven's guardianship, in consonance with the facts, notwithstanding that the truth deals harshly with the image created by sentimental biographers and rhapsodists. To do this I conceived it my duty—no more to the world than to the memory of the great man who, when he told Holz that he should be his biographer, adjured him to tell the truth in words which sound like a paraphrase of Othello's parting injunction:

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate
Nor set down aught in malice.